



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

Executive Office of Environmental Affairs

100 Cambridge Street, Suite 900

Boston, MA 02114-2119

Mitt Romney
GOVERNOR

Kerry Healey
LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR

Stephen R. Pritchard
SECRETARY

Tel: (617) 626-1000
Fax: (617) 626-1181
<http://www.mass.gov/envir>

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Contact: Vanessa Gulati, 617-626-1119
Joe O'Keefe, 617-626-1126

DAM REMOVAL PROCESS TO BE STREAMLINED

Secretary Looks To Environmental & Public Safety Benefits

Secretary Stephen Pritchard, of the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs (EOEA), announced today that he will be convening a working group aimed at streamlining the process to remove dams in Massachusetts.

While many dams provide important societal benefits in the form of water supply, flood control, and hydropower, many other dams are no longer serving the purpose for which they were built, but remain as decaying relics of our industrial past. Over time, these deteriorating structures can become significant safety hazards and maintenance liabilities. In addition, dams block fish passage, raise water temperatures, impair water quality and block the natural movement of sediment and debris. Dam removal can be a win-win solution to the problem of aging dams in the Commonwealth by relieving owners of liability, eliminating public safety hazards, and removing barriers to fish movement.

The near breach of the Whittenton Dam that threatened downtown Taunton in October, raised public awareness and highlighted the problem of deteriorating dams. Despite the potential benefits, very few dams have been proactively removed in Massachusetts. According to Secretary Pritchard, "For dam owners who want to rid themselves of a liability, to protect their property and their neighbor's property and to restore rivers and streams the extensive process and related costs can be major roadblocks." He further stated, "The environmental and public safety benefits make this an important goal." With more than 3,000 dams in the state—many in failing condition—there is a distinct need to make dam removal a more viable alternative.

The working group will facilitate dam removal by evaluating alternatives to reduce regulatory complexity. Proactive dam removal is often dramatically delayed by an extensive review process and dam owners are frequently discouraged from proceeding by the associated costs and time.

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The regulatory framework in Massachusetts is designed to prevent adverse environmental impacts, but was not designed to facilitate projects that could proactively improve the natural environment, such as dam removal. Understanding that environmental protection is fundamental to Massachusetts environmental policy, the working group will review the approaches that other states have taken to facilitate dam removal, including New Hampshire, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

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